

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Barry, Malcolm. 1978. 'Tony Coe's *Zeitgeist*'. *Contact*, 19. pp. 12-14. ISSN 0308-5066.

Tony Coe's 'Zeitgeist'

THE IDEA of a musical work based on the concept of the spirit unfolding through time might seem admirable, if potentially gargantuan, or it might seem absurdly pretentious. Words, however, do not remain fixed in their meaning: 'Zeitgeist' has been transformed from its original Hegelian, dynamic origin into a static concept concentrating on an era or, more particularly, a closely defined stage of development that, despite the 'Geist', is not necessarily spiritual.

That a former sideman of Humphrey Lyttleton should be responsible for a work thus titled (and relevantly so, despite jazz composers' notorious attitudes towards such fineries), a work, moreover, that most successfully fuses knowledge of a number of techniques of composition and performance so that it may be characterised as neither 'jazz' nor 'straight' (nor even one of those curious hybrids) might well cause surprise depending upon one's view of Lyttleton or jazz players in general. But Tony Coe is very much a musician who defies categorisation: he has worked with both John Dankworth and Alan Hacker — a saxophonist whose musical reading centres on Forte and Perle. Coe is a quiet individual, unassuming to the point of reticence; he was sufficiently influenced by his experience of National Service to adopt beliefs verging on anarchism. His composed music has the same qualities of individualism: this is particularly true of *Zeitgeist*.

Zeitgeist was written four to five years ago with the aid of an Arts Council bursary. These awards are not so newsworthy now as far as jazz musicians are concerned, though undoubtedly still too few. It is not unheard of, say, Don Rendell or Stan Tracey to obtain one; whether lesser lights are so lucky is another matter.

Coe's piece owes a lot to the Arts Council since they also made the recording possible. This fact is not made clear on the sleeve (the sleeve-notes by Coe, Richard Rodney Bennett and Sue Stedman-Jones are otherwise exemplary), which is a pity when it is considered how much stick that body has to take — doing good by stealth is all very well, but ... The recording was made in 1976 and released late in 1977 (EMI Lansdowne Series, EMC 3207, £3.89). Despite a pressing fault in some of the early copies the record sold reasonably well in its early months of issue though it received little critical attention.

The lack of attention from the critics arises from the difficulty of categorising the work. For example, the (favourable) review in *Records and Recording*¹ was written by Kevin Stephens, the 'straight' contemporary music reviewer, while in *The Observer*² Dave Gelly reviewed it in company with *Elvis Presley In Concert* and *Out of their Skulls* by The Pirates. Gelly found it 'formidable ... but ... a kind of landmark'.

Zeitgeist is based on a twelve-note series (Ex. 1) and, more particularly, its two hexachords. The work alternates fairly closed sections with transitional

Example 1

¹ February 1978.

² January 29, 1978.

interludes. Two illustrations the use of the series are shown in Ex. 2: (a) is an accompaniment in rock style that characterises the second of the main sections; (b) gives the pitches of the tune and bass from the beginning of the fifth section — the potential hit single from the album/the positive poetic centrepiece of the work/the changes around which there is the most jazz-based improvisation. That Ex. 2(b) is all of these and more will demonstrate the flexibility of Coe's approach to the work and its constituent parts; the problem of categorisation is inevitable.

Alban Berg, to whose memory Coe has dedicated the

Example 2(a)

(b)

work, was a similarly open-minded composer. Bennet writes on the sleeve: 'Berg's music grew from a brilliantly fertile imagination controlled by a ... planned and articulated structure'. He believes that *Zeitgeist* has this balance, something that will be confirmed by listening to it. It is a fitting tribute to Berg in its openness of technique, whether in the use of the series, the improvisation sections, or, most significantly of all perhaps, the personnel on the record. Coe has made use of his experience in all forms of music to produce a true synthesis rather than the all-too-common glue bond: it is this experiential aspect of the composition and performance that gives the work its conviction.

Berg is honoured in other, more accidental ways. The drowning of *Wozzeck* finds an echo in the imitative chromatic lines towards the end, while there is a splendid out-of-tune piano accompaniment to the inversion of the melody in Ex. 2(b) later in the same section. Coe intended the latter to convey a 'night-club' atmosphere; the recording certainly helps this impression. The work falls into sections based on Jill Robin's poems separated by transitions and interludes of varying kinds and varying definition: a clarinet cadenza at one point, an ensemble 'tumult' at another, a rhythmic pattern at a third. There may be a definite break between sections (just before 'Love Song') or a gradual merging (the first transition). There is, too, a variable amount of interrelationship between setting and transition.

The poems comment on modern civilisation in a generally pessimistic way although the work ends on a note of hope. Coe has not used work-painting in any thoroughgoing way, although the opening pitch and its gradual absorption by the other eleven symbolises a doomed flower at the start and the eternal spirit of man at the close. The first transition is, says Coe, 'expressive of

Table 1

Section	Poem	Music
Introduction	Take this flower (spoken)	Exposition of series material merging into
I	Ah, this world (hummed — solo song)	First tune
Transition		Polyrhythmic texture merging into
II	Join the dance (duet)	Bass riff (Ex. 2(a))
Transition		Upward chromatic lines continue, interspersed with rhythmic reminiscences of II
III	I am confused (spoken)	
Transition		Improvised duet for trumpet and bass clarinet leading into
IV	Brother and sister (duet)	
Transition		Notated duet for chromatic timpani
	(side 2)	
V	Love me now (duet)	Ex. 2(b). Most nearly closed form of all the sections. Verse; solos (guitar, flugelhorn); verse inverted; verse original.
Transition		Clarinet cadenza (Hacker)
VI	We are together (duet)	Verse; solos (soprano sax; trumpet; vibes; guitar); verse merging into
Coda		A disintegrative section in which texture of VI is overwhelmed by 'chorale-like' canon which, in retrograde, ends the work on the note with which it began.

the dissonance and relentlessness of our industrial age and also symbolises the vicissitudes of modern life'.

The rough scheme of the work is given in Table 1. ('Verse' here refers to the poetic verse rather than verse as opposed to chorus.) The earlier sections are short while V is quite extended. The 'song sections', V, VI and, to a lesser extent, IV are tunes with harmonic accompaniment derived partially or fully from the initial series. The melodic writing in these songs is varied but totally convincing in its context. It may be argued that the scheme set out in Table 1 makes too much reference to the poems and makes too many divisions in the earlier part of the work. However, each of the sections (and, for that matter, the transitions) has a musical character which distinguishes it strongly from its surroundings though it is linked to them by the use of twelve-note technique.

Twelve-note technique is omnipresent in both accompaniments and textural sections (the music is often triple-layered; melody; accompaniment (harmonic); further accompaniment (textural)) and is a feature of several of the solos, e.g. the notated duet for chromatic timpani and in the improvisatory duet for trumpet and bass clarinet. In the latter the series is the basis for improvisation over an ensemble which enters to deny the soloists successive notes of the series; this culminates in a twelve-note chord from which the two soloists descend into the beginning of the next section.

In such a flexible work, however, there is no slavish adherence to the technique. Coe says of the opening: 'keeping strictly to the series (apart from treating it as two separate hexachords) would have produced this at the opening: [Ex. 3(a)]. I felt that the dissonance [Ex. 3(b)] was not poignant enough, preferring [Ex. 3(c)] which necessitated the unfolding of the series, in *this* case, in rough order: [Ex. 3(d)].' In this empiricism the example, if not the influence, of Berg may once again be seen.

Another interesting example of Coe's use of the technique occurs throughout the work. A hexachord is outlined in one part, often melodically; the other hexachord then enters with a double function: to

Example 3(a)

Example 3(a) shows a twelve-note series in a 4/4 time signature. The notes are: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6. The series is presented in a single melodic line with some rhythmic variation. Below it, (b) shows a similar series but with a different rhythmic pattern, creating a different dissonance. (c) shows the series in a different rhythmic arrangement, emphasizing the unfolding of the series. (d) shows the series in a more complex rhythmic pattern, with notes numbered 1 through 11, indicating a specific sequence of notes.

complete the series but also to substitute for a tonal chord in a jazz context, perhaps leading into and thus emphasising the first beat of the next bar, perhaps as accompaniment (Ex. 4).

The piece moves predominantly in regular pulse; there is no organisation of the durations save that dictated by textural demands, either purely or associated with the type of pitch manipulation mentioned above, although canon and its associated techniques is a frequent and vitally structural feature of the music.

Coe's mixture of tonal progressions, textural writing and twelve-note technique may seem like recipe for an indulgent mishmash; in fact these techniques are balanced

Example 4

Example 4 shows a musical score for voice, clarinets, and piano. The voice part is in the upper staff, with notes numbered 6 and 5. The clarinets part is in the middle staff, with notes numbered 3, 2, and 1. The piano part is in the lower staff, with notes numbered 7-12. The score shows a complex interplay of these parts, with the piano part providing a harmonic accompaniment for the voice and clarinets.

very deftly. In this he is helped considerably by the poems and also by the performance.

In this work the performers are on crucial importance and here Coe is very fortunate. Although mentioning individuals in an ensemble context such as this is invidious, special mention must be made of Daryl Runswick on string and Fender basses, who provides exactly the right support in every section and uses both as *musical* instruments. The two vocalists, Mary Thomas and Norma Winstone are superb, while all the instrumental solos, whether notated or improvised, are taken with a distinction befitting some of the best musicians in the country. The mixing and production are a joy to listen to. Coe wrote many of the parts with individuals in mind, e.g. Alan Hacker's wide range of techniques is exploited in the last transition.

The mixture of Matrix on one side and Norma Winstone and Kenny Wheeler on the other works very well; this is one aspect of the calculated balance of dichotomies that, with a lesser creative imagination than Coe's, would disintegrate into meaninglessness. Given that it's an ensemble situation, however, Coe is once again fortunate in his conductor, Bob Cornford, who binds the work together very well.

To an audience hardened to the intricacies of total serialism, systemic music or a historicist viewpoint, *Zeitgeist* could seem simple, almost naive. Coe's use of the series, even given his canons and retrogrades, is not particularly difficult to hear: he is concerned more with communicating through the medium of his experience than with hermetic technique. It would be a pity if direct communication of this sort became a vice when it is as coherent as it is here. The same could be said of the poems: somewhat naively anti-urban in their imagery, they are nonetheless justified and integrated into the work by their setting; in that they are a representation of the spirit of the time, the somewhat static development of the concept, they give the work its title.

The comparative simplicity of technique and 'message' is completed by the dependence of the work upon performance. This puts it into the context of jazz, along with works such as *Kaleidoscope of Rainbows* by Neil Ardley³ and the extended scores of Graham Collier, Kenny Wheeler and Barry Guy.⁴ Within this general area, however, it has its own distinct place. It has a substance of flexibility missing in Ardley's stricter work and mixture of textures not to be found in those of the other composers. This is not to decry the others, who are attempting different things with different materials, very successfully, too. The 'jazz' epithet is justified in the case of Coe's work by the emphasis placed on performance and, in this instance, by the performers themselves: the tone of the sustained notes at the opening — slightly inflected and 'dirty' — reveals that particular background. But these performers break out of this jazz categorisation and take the work *as heard* with them (the work *as composed* had already stepped outside the genre). There is thus a sort of tangled relationship between *Zeitgeist* and 'jazz', both affirming and denying; it is to the performers' credit that the potential gap between Coe's intention and their realisation of its never appears.

Coe is excellent at drawing unusual sounds from his ensemble. Quite apart from the use of the voice, and particularly Norma Winstone's improvisation, there are many instrumental sounds that reveal an ear for colour that unites his experiences with his imagination, e.g. an almost heterophonic use of electric piano, vibes, electric guitar and marimba foreground with a wind background in the third transition.

³Gull Records.

⁴For example, Graham Collier, *Darius* (Graham Collier Music, GCM 741), Kenny Wheeler Big Band, *Song for Someone* (Incus Records, Incus 10), Barry Guy with the London Jazz Composers Orchestra, *Ode for Jazz Orchestra* (Incus Records, Incus 6/7).

The achievement of *Zeitgeist* is one of balance: balance between twelve-note composition (which it *is*) and jazz-based improvisation (which it *does*); the balances between verses and transitions and between all the sections; the integration of the words into the work and their simultaneous organisation of it. Jazz composers tend to be frightened of words: not so Coe. *Zeitgeist* is a courageous piece, typical in its quiet insistence of the composer.

Originally taught the clarinet by a straight musician, he found himself (after the loathed Army) playing jazz with Lyttleton and Dankworth and leading his own quintet (there is a record, now deleted, from the early 1960s of the Tony Coe Quintet). He also found himself having composition lessons with Alfred Nieman and Nicholas Maw, found himself invited to join Matrix and now finds himself invited to join Matrix and now finds himself leading an excellent small group called Axel and contemplating another extended work. In talking to Coe one gets the impression that the deliberate and assertive side to his character is largely reserved for his music, written and performed⁵ and that he discovers himself in situations rather than engineering them. This is not to say that he is anybody's fool: quite the reverse, he has merely sorted out his priorities. He remains very much a working musician: on tour with the Kenny Wheeler Big Band one month (another Arts Council funding), with Axel another and much in demand in the recording studio. Clearly all this activity is necessary to him as a complete musician: the balance is reflected in the music of *Zeitgeist*.⁶

All this, tunes too, and — as an 'essential bonus' — *Zeitgeist* swings.

Music examples by express permission of the composer.

⁵For example his solo in *Rainbow 5* on the Ardley record mentioned above.

⁶Further information on Coe may be found in his entries in *Jazz Now*, the Jazz Centre Society Guide, ed. R. Cotterrell (London: Quartet Books, 1976) and in the *Encyclopaedia of Jazz*, ed. Leonard Feather (New York: Bonanza, 1970). He is also mentioned in Ian Carr's *Music Outside* (London: Latimer, 1973). Credited or not, Coe appears on many records, particularly those concerned with contemporary jazz.

All books and music reviewed
in *Contact* can be obtained from

Philip Martin

MUSIC BOOKS

22 HUNTINGTON RD

YORK YO3 7RL

TEL. (0904) 36111

Fast personal service

**Catalogues of new and out-of-print
musical literature available
on request.**

Wants lists/Items for sale always welcomed.